

Message Text

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PAGE 01 BUENOS 01095 181753Z

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ACTION ARA-10

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 1095

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, AR

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT MOVES TO SILENCE CRITICS, WORSENS CRISIS

REF: ZAMBITO-BELL TELCON FEBRUARY 16

1. SUMMARY. EFFORTS BY MRS. PERON'S ADMINISTRATION TO SILENCE OPPOSITION BY CLOSING CONGRESS AND SILENCING ITS MOST VOCAL PRESS CRITICS HAVE ONLY SERVED TO SHARPEN ANTAGONISMS AND DEEPEN POLITICAL CRISIS. END SUMMARY.

2. DURING COURSE OF LAST WEEK MRS. PERON AND HER CLOSE ADVISORS WERE SUBJECTED TO RISING CHORUS OF CRITICISM FROM CONGRESSIONAL CRITICS WHO CHARGED GOVERNMENT HAD CEASED TO FUNCTION. LED BY UCR, OPPOSITION PARTIES WERE SEEKING TO PLACE BEFORE CONGRESS A MOTION DECLARING MRS. PERON "UNABLE" TO DISCHARGE OFFICE OF PRESIDENCY, A MOVE THEY CLAIMED WOULD FORCE HER FROM OFFICE. UCR LEADER BALBIN SPENT ENTIRE WEEK MEETING WITH HEADS OF OTHER PARTIES AND SOME DISSIDENT PERONISTS TO TEST VIABILITY OF SCHEME. ACCORDING TO UCR SOURCES, BALBIN UNDERTOOK TASK WHEN ADVISED BY THREE CINCS THAT THEIR PATIENCE WITH CIVILIAN SOLUTIONS COMING TO AN END. AS WEEK ENDED, PROSPECTS FOR CONGRESSIONAL SOLUTION TO CRISIS SEEMED REMOTE DESPITE PUBLICLY EXPRESSED FEARS BY DIVERSE POLITICAL LEADERS THAT FAILURE TO REMOVE MRS. PERON FROM OFFICE SOON WOULD SPELL END TO CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT.

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PAGE 02 BUENOS 01095 181753Z

3. AT THAT POINT (FEBRUARY 13) MINISTER OF INTERIOR ARES ANNOUNCED THAT GOA HAD DECIDED THAT CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM WAS THE GOVERNMENT'S "NUMBER ONE PRIORITY." THIS ANNOUNCEMENT BOTH SURPRISED AND ANGERED NOT ONLY THE OPPOSITION BUT LARGE NUMBER OF PERONISTS AS WELL. MOST SAW MOVE AS INEPT AND INEFFECTUAL ATTEMPT TO DIVERT ATTENTION FROM MAIN ISSUES, I.E., THE CONTINUANCE OF CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT AND THE LACK OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MALAISE. ARES'S STATEMENT WAS ACCOMPANIED BY DECREE ORDERING CLOSE OF LA OPINION (SEE SEPTTEL) AND LED TO CHARGES GOVERNMENT WOULD SOON MOVE TO CLOSE CONGRESS. ARES IMMEDIATELY CALLED A PRESS CONFERENCE TO STATE THAT THESE CHARGES WERE A "FANTASY" PRODUCED BY GOVERNMENT OPPONENTS IN THE GRIPS OF "HYSTERIA."

4. ON FEBRUARY 16, ARES DESTROYED WHAT LITTLE PUBLIC CREDIBILITY HE HAD BY TRANSMITTING DECREE TO CONGRESS WITHDRAWING ALL PENDING BUSINESS BEFORE BOTH CHAMBERS, THUS CLOSING CONGRESS UNTIL MAY 1. PREDICTABLY, THIS MOVE ONLY INCREASED CALLS FOR CONGRESS TO MOVE TO OUST MRS. PERON. ONE CONGRESSMAN TOLD EMBOFF HOURS BEFORE ARES'S ANNOUNCEMENT "OUR ONLY HOPE TO OUST PRESIDENT CONSTITUTIONALLY IS FOR HER TO MAKE STRATEGIC ERROR, LIKE CLOSING CONGRESS." WHETHER GOVERNMENT MOVE ACUTALLY RESULTS IN EITHER IMPEACHMENT OR DECLARATION OF HER INABILITY TO FILL OFFICE REMAINS TO BE SEEN. HOWEVER, BY HER OWN ACTIONS SHE HAS STRENGTHENED HAND OF HER OPPONENTS.

5. SINCE ARES'S ANNOUNCEMENT MONDAY, OPPOSITION HAS BEGUN NEW CANVASS OF CONGRESSIONAL OPINION TO SEE IF IN LIGHT OF NEW CIRCUMSTANCES THEY NOW HAVE VOTES TO PROCEED TO A SUCCESSFUL SHOWDOWN. MAJOR FOCUS OF ATTENTION AT PRESENT IS LARGE BLOC OF LABOR DEPUTIES WHO UP TO NOW HAVE REMAINED LOYAL TO MRS. PERON. HOWEVER, FOLLOWING LAST TWO WEEKS OF TENSION AND DISCORD BETWEEN THE PRESIDENT AND LABOR, POSSIBILITY THAT LABOR MAY TURN ON MRS. PERON IS NO LONGER BEING DISCOUNTED. THE LORENZO-MIGUEL-LED 62 ORGANIZATIONS HAS CALLED SERIES OF MEETINGS TODAY TO "ANALYZE THE SITUATION AND DETERMINE ITS POSITION." AT THIS POINT MIGUEL, WHO IS IN BARILOCHE, HAS NOT TIPPED HIS HAND, BUT BOTH PRESS REPORTS AND EMBASSY CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 BUENOS 01095 181753Z

CONTACTS HAVE REPORTED HE IS DISCUSSING POSSIBILITIES OF FIND WAY TO SUPPORT PARLIAMENTARY MOVE AGAINST MRS. PERON WITHOUT PUBLICLY DENOUNCING HER. SOME REPORTS INDICATE LABOR MIGHT ATTEND SESSION TO HELP FORM QUORUM BUT THEN ABSTAIN ON SUBSTENTIVE VOTE.

6. AT PRESENT IT IS EXPECTED THAT MOVE TO AUTO COVOKE CONGRESS WILL COME AS EARLY AS THIS FRIDAY (FEBRUARY 20).

AND VOTE ON MRS. PERON EXPECTED SHORTLY THEREAFTER. MILITARY IS REPORTED TO BE FOLLOWING ISSUE WITH CLOSE INTEREST AND SEVERAL SOURCES HAVE TOLD EMBASSY THAT CINCS ARE PUTTING OUT WORD THAT THIS MAY BE LAST REAL CHANCE FOR CIVILIANS TO PUT THEIR HOUSE IN ORDER.

7. COMMENT: IT IS STILL NOT CLEAR THAT COMPLEX NEGOTIATING AND BARGAINING NECESSARY TO END CRISIS VIA CONGRESSIONAL SOLUTION CAN SUCCEED. HOWEVER, PROSPECTS FOR INITIATIVE PROSPERING HAVE DEFINITELY BEEN ENHANCED BY LATEST DEVELOPMENTS. IN ANY EVENT, PRESENT SITUATION HAS MOVED COUNTRY CLOSER TO A SHOWDOWN. FROM US POINT OF VIEW, IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT ON WHAT MANY SEE AS EVE OF A COUP NO CHARGES OF US INVOLVEMENT HAVE SURFACED. RAUL ALFONSIN, A KEY UCR LEADER, AND FORMERLY A KEY CRITIC OF US INTERVENTION IN LATIN AMERICAN AFFAIRS, TOLD AMBASSADOR HILL FEBRUARY 17 THAT US CONDUCT THE PAST TWO YEARS HAS BEEN SO CLEARLY CORRECT THAT EVEN MALICIOUS ATTEMPTS TO DRAG THE US INTO THE CURRENT CRISIS HAVE NOT SUCCEEDED. OSCAR ALENDE, LEADER OF THE LEFTIST PARTIDO INTRANSIGENTE, MADE THE SAME POINT IN NEWSPAPER INTERVIEW IN CRONISTA COMERCIAL FEBRUARY 16.
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